

Original Paper UDC [316.7:791.4]:502

Received October 31st, 2011

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Environmental Issues from Hollywood Perspective – Celluloid Utopias and Anthropocentric White Patriarchal Capitalism

Abstract

Films function both as powerful artistic forms and also as multi-layered texts, which transfer certain semantic-axiological contents to the audience. These contents articulate different values and ideological and worldview "messages". Many theoretical and critical analyses have shown that science fiction films are a kind of vision-holders of the perception and evaluation of nature by the future society. These preoccupations – describing actual environmental problems and dilemmas – are particularly not only of SF films; there is quite a number of films that range from ecocentric to anti-ecological worldviews. The paper considers connections between bioethical problems and film industry by analyzing crucial topics in James Cameron's Hollywood blockbuster Avatar, with special emphasis on their presentations and interpretations of nature, technology, race and gender.

Key words

films, *Avatar*, environmental worldviews, anthropocentrism, nature, technology, race, Other, gender, capitalism

Introduction: messages and their transmission tools

By crossing the doorstep of the second decade of the 21st century, we can conclude that we live in difficult but interesting times.¹ Since World War II onwards, the ongoing scientific and technological revolution has managed to impose itself as a central social factor in Western societies. In this process natural sciences and technique have been shown as some new divinities which, as it seems, dispose of entirely autonomous and self-legitimizing, principally infinite power. The frightening implications of this and such power, on the one hand, but also quite real, partially irreversible damage that it already brought to the mankind and the planet during the last decades, on the other hand, resulted in rousing the consciousness on the necessity to suppress it resolutely. This awareness, then, resulted, among other things, in the development of the concepts of sustainability and sustainable development and yielding of bioethics. Neither the concept of sustainable development nor bioethics have emerged as the legacies of strictly theoretical concern for the fate of the mankind and planetary biosphere, but have evolved from the abundance of

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The text is based on the paper presented by Zdenko Zeman and Marija Geiger Zeman "Bioethics and Film – Celluloid Utopias and

Environmental Worldviews" on May 17, 2011 at the *10th Lošinj Days of Bioethics*, Mali Lošinj, Croatia.

other-than-scientific insights into the ambiguity of the current situation and the intention to initiate steps and measures which will bring about genuine socio-political changes. Since any and every meaningful initiative presumes a well-informed and value oriented points of view, the ideas that enable such standpoints are extremely important, as well as the means that enable their articulation and efficient transfer.

At this end we are particularly interested in film as the means of dissemination of environmentally and bioethically relevant concepts, ideas and messages. Although we are well aware that, according to the well-known (and probably accurate) Marshall McLuhan's thesis (introduced in his famous book *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, published in 1964), that a medium itself represents a message, this text will definitely push into the background the questions of specific features of a film as a medium. Our major interest will be, consequently, focused onto specific (environmentally and bioethically relevant) topics and ideas that a medium articulates to the audience. Therefore our analysis will not be a filmological one, but it will analyze, in the first place, the topic itself – the narrative, persuasiveness of protagonists and antagonists, and also, the meaning and the significance that arise from what we see with “the naked eye”.

At this point we have to observe that the potential of a film as a transmitter of certain messages – particularly those environmentally and bioethically relevant – is further increased by the fact that the age we live in is also characterized by some kind of supremacy of visuality. When talking about films within the context of the contemporary domination of visuality, it will be sufficient to recall the obvious and indisputable fact that there is a great number of films that function not only as the merchandise on the entertainment market, but, on the contrary, they successfully and efficiently mediate relevant, frequently very multi-layered topics and “messages”. There is no need to explicitly illustrate and supply proofs that a film features great transmission capacities to transfer simple pieces of information or more complex and more demanding themes in terms of perception and reception (viewpoints, ideas, concepts, values...). Anyway, these film potentials were early noticed, in that, for instance, 20th century totalitarian regimes aimed at (mis)using them for propaganda in their favour. It is that wide range defined by such extremes – from shallow and trivial, “innocent” entertainment, on the one hand, to the ideologically impregnated, deadly serious propaganda with hidden agenda, on the other – that demonstrates the fascinating diversity within which one could perceive the expressive power of a film.

Film and society – new perspectives

Reconsidering briefly the value of visuality, we would like to remind once again of its cognitive value that was clearly observed and explicitly recognized in social sciences as well. For instance, Polish sociologist Piotr Sztompka, having made allusions to the famous concept of sociological imagination developed by C. Wright Mills half a century ago (from the book of the same title, published in 1959) argues in favour of using photographs as extremely potent tools for sociological analysis. Namely, he suggests: “Just ‘look around’; this is the best advice for cultivating the sociological imagination” (Sztompka, 2008: 24). And, indeed, Sztompka's suggestion to (carefully) look around in the search to comprehend social life, holds good not only for photographs, but it also, *mutatis mutandis*, involves a film, which sets “frozen” reality of photography into motion by giving temporal dimension to it.

Speaking of scientific disciplines, there are no obstacles, on the whole, for the validity of this suggestion not to extend beyond the field of sociology as well (as explicitly said by Sztompka). Whether sociological or humanistic sciences are in question, one should, at last, stick to one only rule: by carefully observing and scrupulously interpreting the pieces of information mediated by the contemporary visual media, one can obtain precious understanding of genuine existential processes and issues. And by doing so, one could, definitely collect stimulating material which can serve to develop thoughtfully unrestrained, free-spirited, multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary forms of analysis and studying of the gravest contemporary time problems, including also the major bioethical and ecological challenges.

Bearing all this in mind, one should not be surprised by the fact that both sociologists, as well as active participants in other sociological and humanistic sciences, have recognized film as the source of stimulating analytical material. And so it was that during the last decades some film titles were recognized by numerous film theoreticians having captured their peculiar attention. We are going to mention just two film references that inspired the authors of different provenances to bring up basic philosophical and moral-ethical dilemmas: *The Matrix* (1999) by Wachowski brothers and the *Alien* series.² These films elaborated their own topics in such an impressive and competent way that “some philosophers have gone so far as to claim that films not only contain interesting philosophical references but also can actually philosophize” (Shapshay, 2009: 2).

And indeed, films do not need to be masterpieces to be useful and interesting to philosophers and social scientists. Therefore even contemporary Hollywood films can be used as “useful tools” to illustrate important concepts and ideas and to “serve as an exercise in the application of the sociological imagination” (Dowd, 1999: 324). This is possible on account of the fact that a lot of films – with either smaller or greater accuracy and persuasiveness, and often without their authors’ intentions to be that way – offer eloquent evidence of existential, social and worldview context which they come of, thus enabling a careful analytical eye to reconstruct in details cultural, economical, political and other factors that (co)shaped it. One could, then, say that in this way film and society illuminate each other.

Film as a polysemic text

The approach we are dealing with here looks upon a film as a text – “in the same way that a novel is a text, not only telling a story, but providing moral instruction, social observation, social context, and political judgement” (Sutherland & Feltey, 2010: 7). Being often multivocal and polysemic, films function as “complex, nuanced, and often internally contradictory texts” (Poddeschi, 2002: 261) and therefore could not be taken at face value, but they ask for close reading and scrupulous, well-informed interpretation.

As any other cultural artefact, film is “a text that conveys information, carrying the ideological messages of both its authors and the culture that produced it” (Benshoff & Griffin, 2009: 14). Since their authors (more or less intentionally) adjust their contents taking into account the expectations and perceptive states of mind of the audience they are focused on, films also come to be

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Alien series ranges over: *Alien* (1979) by Ridley Scott, *Aliens* (1986) by James Cameron,

*Alien*³ (1992) by David Fincher, and *Alien: Resurrection* (1997) by Jean-Pierre Jeunet.

relevant and reliable sources of information about ideas, beliefs and attitudes that are widely shared in the population. In other words, “to know the films that people watch is to gain access to their understanding of cultural values, norms and cherished myths” (Dowd, 1999: 330). As already said, film and society illuminate each other.

This paper is going to analyze the example of a more recent, exceptionally successful Hollywood blockbuster which – behind the superficial layer with dynamic story, attractive action and film effects presented with virtuosity – mediates to the spectators certain worldview values and moral guidelines. We are talking about *Avatar* (2009) by James Cameron, which, as we know, brought about huge financial profits and won several *Academy Awards*, giving rise, in addition, to a number of controversies about the final message and implications of its story.

Prior to making comments on the film itself, we should remind ourselves of the fact which defines the current *Zeitgeist*. Namely, in spite of “the postmodern truism that nobody believes in grand narratives any more... eco-politics has become the single largest unifying political discourse of the early 21st century” (Cubitt, 2005: 9). No matter how one interprets the evident “mobilization” of the mankind pertaining to the environmental issues (and “eco-politics”) and its forms and achievements to date, the fact that the mankind as a whole is faced with a “big”, unavoidable and urgent issue, is beyond any dispute whatsoever. It is, of course, the question of survival of the entire life on the planet Earth. This question is impossible to be declined, which is evident also in that the environmental issues (in the broadest sense of the word) found their way to penetrate into all the spheres of life, leaving very impressive traces in “art worlds” as well (Becker). Environmental issues – such as, for instance, eco-ethics, anthropocentrism, genetic modification, climate changes – also unavoidably infiltrated into innumerable artefacts of, so-called, popular arts and popular culture as a whole.

Celluloid utopias and “future myths”

Within the context of the common sensibilization for the environmental issues, of a particular interest are science fiction films very often questioning the position and the meaning of nature – as the ultimate basis and condition for the survival of man and the entire life. Within this pattern, nature has always been brought into correlation with the society, one way or another. In science fiction films this is, as a rule, done in the way to “conceptualize and problematize the voyage into the near and distant future” (Podeschi, 2002: 254), creating specific “future myths”. The basic function of this “future myths” is to translate reality issues of the actual life into some not yet existing, utopian life framework, in which they can be dealt with and interpreted much more freely and more radically. However, as already said, these projections, “whether intended or not... comment on nature and the social relationship with nature” (Podeschi, 2002: 254). By embracing, then, both the human society and the natural basis of its survival, these film narratives communicate coherent, “holistic visions of future social reality” (Podeschi, 2002: 254), which either optimistically or, more often, pessimistically, give the description of the “future society” and the way it will perceive and act towards its fateful “Other” – the Nature.

These future myths have some common grounds with the archaic origin myths. In the first place, both of them deal with the contemporary reality

from the point of view that is spatially and temporarily shifted so much that it enables or, what is more, inevitably produces, more ambitious interpretation consequences. Thus origin myths get as far as to (purported to be) primeval beginnings, explaining the origin and illustrating the primordial times of some community; future myths, on the other hand, head toward space-time beyond anything that we know today, revealing not only the perception of what we will be (or what we would like to be), but also the perception of that what we already are. Back to the far past, “back” to the far future – the concerns of both these directions, *in ultima linea*, are unavoidable archetype questions on identity: who (what) we are, where we come from, where we are going to...

Besides, both future myths and origin myths have legitimate function, in so that they can refer to the reality which they come of in two contradictory ways – explicitly or less explicitly. They can be apologetic, that is to say, they can set aside the distance that “opens the eyes” and put up with the inertia of drowning in the actual moment, perpetuating in this way the existing condition. On the other hand, they can be critically-polemically inclined, demystifying unidimensionality of the existing status – for the sake of the attitude which incorporates cognitive-evaluation withdrawal from the existing condition.

As previously mentioned, in this paper we are going to analyze in more details *Avatar* (2009) by James Cameron, taken as an example of a modern Hollywood film which mediates to the spectators certain ecological and bioethical relevant messages. As we know, this film brought a great financial profit along with giving rise to very different interpretations and vigorous debates on the significance and the implications of its narrative. It is not necessary or possible to present here the complete typology of all these commentaries, so that we are going to mention only some of them, just to illustrate their wide-ranging intellectual and ideological varieties (according to the abstract in: Pavičić, 2010: 72–73). It comes out that in *Avatar* some saw “a beautiful ecology film” which should be shown to the present-day and future generations for them to become aware of basic values of, so called, organic worldview, while some others asserted it to be a racist one.³

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One of the questions put in *Essence Magazine* was, for example, the question: “Does Sci-Fi Blockbuster ‘Avatar’ Have a Racist Subtext?”. The question is a rhetorical one, while the arguments given have a plausible pattern: “The premise of the movie is simple and somewhat familiar; a White man goes and lives with the ‘natives’, learns their ways and somehow becomes their leader, (...) a fantasy about race told from the point of view of White people” (<http://www.essence.com/2009/12/22/does-sci-fi-blockbuster-avatar-have-a-ra/>). The similar interpretation was offered by David Brooks, a columnist in *The New York Times*, in his article under the title “The Messiah Complex”, summing up the *Avatar* story in the following words: “This is the oft-repeated story about a manly young adventurer who goes into the wilderness in search of thrills and profit. But, once there, he meets the native people and finds that they are noble and spiritual and pure. And so he emerges as their Messiah, leading them on a righteous crusade against his own rotten civilization” (<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/08/opinion/08brooks.html>). As

for the variations of the myth on the so called *noble savage*, and insisting on the redeeming transformation of the main hero, they obviously cannot hide asymmetries emerging from the apparent superiority of the white race. In this context it is interesting to notice that along with the interpretation of *Avatar* as a film with racist agenda, one can come across some out-of-film facts that correspond with it. For instance, if you take a look at the *Avatar* cast, it becomes quite clear that the voices of the *noble savages* – the Na’vi people – were given, as a rule, by the actors and actresses of colour – Afro-Americans and Cherokee Indians (see <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0499549/>). This is in line with some casting practices that do not apply only to the film we are here talking about. For Zoe Saldana who has a leading role of the native heroine Neytiri in *Avatar*, it is “just the latest in a long line of actors and actresses of color who have represented in galaxies far, far away” (<http://www.essence.com/2009/12/18/black-sci-fi-characters/>).

The Vatican *L'Osservatore Romano* criticised its “promotion of pantheism and *New Age*”. Some critics that can be categorized, in the broadest sense of the word, as the American “right conservative scene” reproach that it “asks from the audience to raise the spirits of defeat in American soldiers”, while some others complain that after they watched the film they felt “as if they were hit by the left hammer”. On the other hand, some “left” oriented critics are about equally severe in their qualifications of the film as “the white guilt fantasy” which suggests that white people should go on being leaders of the coloured ones, however, not any longer externally, but internally etc. (Pavičić, 2010). This variety of reception, if nothing else, very clearly proves the truism of the previous statement – the films are to be understood and interpreted as “complex, nuanced, and often internally contradictory texts” (Podeschi, 2002: 261).

Not in the least discouraged by the cacophony of its interpretations, we are about to put several simple questions on Cameron's *Avatar* in this paper. Is this an optimistic or a pessimistic film? Is its advocating of ecological values consistent and persuasive? Do the values and worldview ideas that it (convincingly or less convincingly) advocates make it an adequate means to teach on the environmental issues?⁴ And finally, is this narrative a really racist imposed one?

***Avatar*: authentic ecological envoy or glossy *New Age* fairy tale?**

While suggesting the answers to these questions, we should start from depicting the major contours of the narrative itself and then further specify the conceptual context of the analysis. This epic narration tells about a paraplegic ex-marine soldier Jake Sully who, instead of his killed twin brother, a scientist, gets involved into a scientific project on the planet of an indicative name – Pandora. The planet is colonized by some earthly corporations and the army, the reason being the deposits of an extremely precious mineral *unobtainium*.⁵ The planet is inhabited by the humanoid Na'vi, while the research team in this surrounding, headed by dr. Grace Augustine, creates and uses, so called, avatars – beings created by combining Na'vi and human DNKs, that physically resemble very much the domicile population, but who, *in ultima linea*, function as humans in Na'vi bodies, since they are controlled by the colonizers.⁶ The avatars enable infiltration into the local community and the fascinating natural surrounding of Pandora and, also, collecting of scientifically relevant, vital information on the plant and animal life, eco-system and local culture. As a substitute for the surgery which will enable him to walk (that he could not afford), the marine Sully accepts another engagement line, in that he promises to the sergeant Quartich, the commander of the military part of the operation, to collect strategically important pieces of information needed for relocation and complete colonization of the local population – regardless of the task he does for the research team. It is quite obvious that the “military backbone” of his engagement excludes any compassion for the domicile population. In his avatar appearance Jake establishes contacts with the local people, falls in love with Neytiri, the princess from the Omaticay clan and – having passed through a radical internal transformation – decides to help the inhabitants in their battle for independence and freedom. However, his “double” engagement becomes unveiled to result in his exile from the domicile community.

And soon the mythical battle starts between the highly technologized and robotized, colonizing army, on one part, and the local people armed only with their arches, arrows and spears, in which Jake Sully appears to be the “chosen” one – Toruk Makto, the saviour of the Na’vi people. After the victory of the local population Pandora is saved, while the corporation and the army go back to the Earth empty-handed.

By a number of its distinguished features *Avatar* perfectly fits into “a set of formal and stylistic conventions that came to be known as the classical Hollywood style” (Benshoff & Griffin, 2009: 23). To make it clear, it is not that the identification of *Avatar* with this stylistic canon interests us because we would like for this film to find its place in the history of film poetics; it is because the specific features of the Hollywood style would help us better understand high efficiency by which *Avatar* transmits its messages and communicates with the mass audience. As summarized by Benshoff & Griffin, “the main objective” of Hollywood style “is to ‘spoon feed’ story information to the spectator, thus keeping everything clearly understood by the audience.” Therefore, one should do whatever is possible “to keep the story clear and characters simple and understandable”; no wonder that “classical Hollywood style is sometimes referred to as the invisible style” (Benshoff & Griffin, 2009: 23–24). This style, always driven by the mentioned intention “to keep the story clear and characters simple” has some other distinctive characteristics as well; however, we are going to mention only those that are important to us within the context of our analysis of *Avatar* (Benshoff & Griffin, 2009: 23–25):

- Lighting, colour, camera position and every other aspect of *mise-en-scène* consistently help the audience remain focused to the story.
- Continuity editing – a system of editing in which each shot follows effortlessly and plausibly from the one before.

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This dilemma is illustrated by Karen Brown: “I’ve encountered intelligent, thoughtful people who feel that *Avatar* contains some of the most compelling ecological messages ever delivered to a mass audience, and others – equally intelligent and thoughtful – who cringe at what they perceive as cheap DayGlo colors overlayed on a cheesy New Age story line” (Brown, 2010). It seems that the film provides plenty of arguments for both interpretations.

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The name of the precious mineral – *unobtainium* – inevitably prompts the association which, however, in *Avatar* itself, was neither explicitly mentioned nor elaborated. *Unobtainium* is, obviously, something which is very hard, or even impossible to get. Literally, *unobtainium* is something (which is) unobtainable. And, really, some dictionaries quote this very meaning: “that which cannot be obtained; theoretical but not yet real” (<http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=unobtainium>). Or, in a less strict form: “In engineering, fiction, and thought experiments, *unobtainium* (also spelled *unobtainium*) is any extremely rare, costly, or impossible material, or (less commonly) device

needed to fulfill a given design for a given application (...) The word *unobtainium* is derived from unobtainable + -ium (the suffix for a number of metal elements)” (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unobtainium>).

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Avatar is “a cloned Na’vi humanoid, initially created *in vitro* on Earth, and then allowed to grow to maturity during the nearly six-year trip to Pandora. Genetic material from the future human ‘driver’ is incorporated into the avatar embryo, allowing the development of the anatomic structures needed to allow a mental link to be established with that particular individual... The avatar project was originally intended to create mine workers who did not need environmental protection systems and could eat Pandoran foodstuffs, but the cost of the mental-link system remained too high for the numbers needed. Avatars are now used only for field work and, when the opportunity arises, to interact with the Na’vi and study them. It was hoped that the avatars could act as unofficial ambassadors, but the Na’vi have for the most part viewed these hybrid creatures with a mix of contempt and mistrust” (Wilhelm & Mathison, 2009: 148).

- Linear narrative – having a beginning, middle and an end, story flows chronologically (flashbacks are not too usual for this format but they are always clearly marked). The narrative is always driven by obviously laying out the goals of the protagonist. Obstructions to this goal are created, regularly by the antagonist(s). Important points in this linear structure consist of various complications, and all these twists and turns inevitably escalate toward the climax, the most intense point of the conflict (and of the whole story), where the antagonist(s) finally gets overpowered by the protagonist. At the final moments of the film – known as closure – all the troubles disappear and all the problems are resolved. Hollywood loves the happy ending!
- The protagonist often has a love interest. Happy ending is “a specific form of closure” which “ties up all of the story’s loose ends and frequently includes the protagonist and the love interest uniting as a romantic/sexual couple” (Benshoff & Griffin, 2009: 25).
- When dealing with complex, serious social issues, Hollywood films regularly reduce them to “matters of personal character” – “in Hollywood films there are rarely corrupt institutions, merely corrupt people” (Benshoff & Griffin, 2009: 25). Evil is always personalized, and characters – protagonists and antagonists – simplified, represented by quickly understood stock characters. Such “instant characterization” habitually draws upon social and cultural stereotypes.

“White patriarchal capitalism”: genuine American *Weltanschauung*

When it comes to talking about classical Hollywood style, Benshoff & Griffin argue that the dominant ideology of American society constitutes “white patriarchal capitalism” and it is not surprising that most Hollywood films, throughout its history and still today, encode white patriarchal capitalism as pivotal and desirable value system. It is an ideology that crucially determines the way most Americans see themselves and world in which they live.

According to Benshoff & Griffin (2009: 8–9), the ideology of white patriarchal capitalism has, to put it briefly, three crucial components, as evident from the syntagm that identifies it: (1) the attribute *white* denotes the racial dimension, or (racist) conviction that “people of Western and Northern European descent are somehow better than are people whose ancestry is traced to other parts of the world”; (2) the attribute *patriarchal* denotes the gender dimension based on the conviction that men are the most important members of the society having, therefore, the greatest right to power; an important feature of American version of patriarchy is the attitude that “sexuality is only condoned within heterosexual marriage, a situation that reinforces women’s role as the child-bearing and child-raising property of men”; (3) *capitalism* is, evidently, a complex, multidimensional issue: open (supposedly “free”) market economy, connected with strictly materialistic, money-oriented values, and ideological “belief that success and worth are measured by one’s material wealth”.

As far as the relationship of capitalism and film industry is concerned, we should recall the notorious fact that the film industry is a part of the capitalist system, which produces artefacts which “often contain ideological messages that reinforce the interests of the owners of capital” (Eschholz, Bufkin & Long, 2002: 301). The degree of subtlety when implanting these messages into the film tissue significantly varies, which is quite understandable, but one

would expect for its efficacy to be proportional to their delicacy and discretion. However, there is a number of indications that support the thesis that during the last couple of decades, the film audience (and not only American, of course) became sufficiently infantilized and incapable to take a well-informed, critical attitude towards social reality, in so that it can with ease “swallow” even relatively coarse, hardly concealed propaganda. Although there is not enough evidence demonstrating strong, undeniable connection between the media content and behaviour of its consumers, it seems true that “most consumers do not just consume the images and story-lines in the media and walk away untouched” (Eschholz, Bufkin & Long, 2002: 301). *Naiveté* of the film industry recipients and also those of other popular culture products, on the whole, is also manifested in their attitude that the film is an entirely neutral and apolitical, innocent form of “escapist family entertainment.” Manipulative mechanisms function to the best when remaining invisible.

Great power of the dominant capitalist culture is reflected in its ability to absorbing elements of countercultures and subcultures. However, as well-known, such an integration, as a rule, does not bring about broadening of horizons or ideological dilution of the dominant culture; on the contrary, the “absorbed” elements become stripped of their critical cutting edge and transform into a benign, ready-made mainstream.⁷

When it comes to the conceptual framework for our analysis of the *Avatar*, Benshoff & Griffin’s concept of classical Hollywood style must be complementary with one more important dimension – *anthropocentrism*. For this occasion, anthropocentrism can be defined as “a human-centered view of the world which privileges humans over other life forms” (Munro, 2004: 74). The anthropocentric worldview attributes intrinsic value exclusively to humans and it is closely connected with the speciesism, “the practice of discriminating against non-human animals because they are perceived as inferior to the human species” (Munro, 2004: 75).

***Avatar*: polysemic, internally ambiguous text**

As already said, *Avatar* fits very well into “classical Hollywood style”. It is characterized, for instance, by all the features of this “invisible style” which delivers to the spectators the story “on a plate”: continuity editing, linear narrative, (over-simplified) “instant” characterization, personalized evil, happy ending etc. But, “behind” the primary layer of action and the narrative which is presented to the spectators with virtuosity by means of cutting edge of the film technique, there is a layer in which those subtle, and at the same time, more important and more serious issues are articulated, that are correlated with certain values and worldview horizon.⁸

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For example, various forms of musical expression, such as jazz, rock, hip-hop, rap etc., passed seemingly impossible way of subversive questioning of the system to its extremely lucrative products.

8

Layer differentiation that we are talking about can also be explained by means of a scheme developed in the aesthetic theory by the German philosopher Nicolai Hartmann. As well-known,

he believed that all aesthetic subjects are multi-layered and that the most important thing is to make difference between the real foreground (*Vordergrund*) and the unreal background (*Hintergrund*). We believe it is not necessary to prove that this concept could also apply to artefacts of, so called, popular culture, especially in case of the film, which, as we know, should be perceived as complex, polysemic and often internally contradictory text.

Avatar raises some questions, more or less distinctly, that are philosophically, bioethically, anthropologically and sociologically relevant. These questions, if looked upon summarily, involve technology, science, nature, interrelations between “civilization” and “savages” and relationships between different species. As we could not analyze them in more details, the limited space that we have taken into account, we are going to categorize them under several basic points of reference and then briefly outline them. First of all, the film describes conflict of environmental worldviews situated on an interplanetary level. On one side, there is an *ecocentric* approach (that stands for simple life characterized by the balance with the surrounding world, that is, harmony and intertwinement with the nature that is infused with spiritual dimension). Such an approach is cherished by the domicile Na’vi people whose primary concern is to protect the integrity of their home, Pandora, which is entirely understandable; it is the question of their bare survival, in the end. On the other side, there is an *anti-ecological* (mechanistic and anthropocentric) approach which, in the name of man’s supremacy over anything and everything, recognizes only the utilitarian value of the nature, articulating itself through control, violence and colonization. Such an attitude is backed up by the aggressive and insatiable earthlings whose only interest is to extract the precious unobtainium hidden in Pandora’s bosom – cataclysmic consequences that will occur in the Na’vi ecosphere caused by this extraction are simply not the matter of their concern. The entire situation is shown, in the spirit of the simplification rules of the Hollywood style, strictly dualistically and in Manichean way – the characters take their distinctly defined positions, while the front line is depicted as a good layout and vigorously.

In principle, what we have here is the confrontation between the nature and technology. Pandora is “a verdant Earth-like world in the star system nearest to our own” (Wilhelm & Mathison, 2009: 5). Its nature is untouched, strikingly picturesque, we could even say it’s magical, but at some moments also dangerous for clumsy and ill-prepared foreigners. Technology of earthlings is, on the other hand, shown in such a way that it easily causes detesting and fear, thus inevitably inducing a critical view. By appearing in a powerful and malignant conglomerate of science-corporations-army, technology is, all by itself, something intrinsically hopelessly infected with the interests of capital and it is essentially militarized (although this is not its only possibility),⁹ since military power is the most efficient means to impose one’s own will over other beings’ will and their communities.

In this context science becomes not only ethically questionable, but also proscribed as an executive instrument of all this violence and of that what is, actually, the driving force of everything – unscrupulous plundering of somebody else’s natural resources. In order to be able to fulfil its function, science must be not only corrupted, but also ethically blind – the scientific team on Pandora is financed by a corporation that wants to come into possession of unobtainium at whatever the cost may be and, therefore, it does not want any objective investigation of the “facts”, so it buys scientific justification and know-how of its despicable plunder. And besides, the conglomerate science-corporations-army produces also the ideological bandage by which it attempts to conceal the true nature of its interests and of the entire operation. According to this reinterpretation, it is not the matter of plundering somebody else’s natural resources, it is the question of “righteous” exchange – “the savages” give over their mineral to obtain in return the invaluable gift from the earthlings, “civilization”.¹⁰

Environmental worldviews: *New Age* ecology mix

Pandora and the life on it evoke the old ideas and narratives about the golden age, which, according to legend, awarded a perfect balance of harmony and peace of mind and complete life easiness. The myth on *noble savages* directs us towards the thematic pattern which we call *New Age* ecology. We are talking about not too consistent a mixture of elements from various mythological heritages that mould the mythical texture of the film. The main hero, resembling the heroes from the old epics, goes in for an adventure that profoundly changes him. First of all, he goes through a physical transformation, and then, what is more important, through a radical spiritual transformation, thus raising his awareness of his true nature and his fateful call. In the film a number of archetypal symbols and situations are used, the inspiration being absorbed from various primary and secondary sources: indigenous and ecofeminist spirituality, Greek mythology, deep ecology concepts, Capra's resumes of his philosophical-scientific concepts of life as the web of the webs etc.¹¹

9

Technology is unavoidable when relationship of society towards nature is in question, its interacting being manifold in the process – it involves “both transforming and controlling nature to suit social interests and is a means through which societies interact with and impact nature” (Podeschi, 2010: 243). In *Avatar* technology appears in different, mutually confronted characters. In the first place, it appears as Western, developed and sophisticated scientific technology that enables to the scientists the implementation of the Avatar project and it makes possible for the corporations to control, examine and monitor the occupied territory. This technology at the same time separates and protects vulnerable earthlings from the unsafe and threatening environment. Another aspect of technology is military technology that is extremely destructive and “advanced” thus, evidently, entirely in contrast with the green and magnificent environment. The third aspect of technology is rudimentary, very simple technique and technology of Pandora's local people. As for military technology, it is shown as a direct threat to anything that might stand in its way – with the exceptions demonstrated by the brave militant pilot Trudy Cachon who, in the course of the film, changes the side which she fights for and the main hero, Jake Sully, who transforms from paraplegic marine to the Na'vi people saviour. The two of them are in the position to alter earthlings' military technology, at least for some short time, into the means of defence of the “natives” and their vital interests. Scientific technology, in spite of being instrumentalized into the corrupted corporation-military complex, does not lack positive connotations because it potentially represents (also) the bridge towards another species, demonstrating at the same time its creative-affirmative potentials as well. It comes out, as it seems, that one could find no powers of reasoning on the nature of technology; however, its instru-

mental attribute seems to be plausible – as if it, *an sich*, is neither good nor bad and that its essential quality is defined by the motives and goals of those who (mis)use it.

10

This substantial pattern – and, anyway, all other essential patterns in the film – is depicted *claire et distincte*. For instance, Parker Selfridge, the “company man” on Pandora, giving instructions to Jake Sully, clearly defines the essence of (unsuccessful) exchange of goods; that is to say, he clearly specifies some things that have been offered to the stubborn “natives” without any success: “Sully, just find out what the blue monkeys want. You know, I mean, we tried to give them medicine, education, roads. But no, no, no, they like mud”. “Blue monkeys”, namely, do not want “civilization”; nevertheless, one can find in the words he uttered a belief, in the principal, that either some kind of an agreement or exchange could possibly be realized – as soon as it is found out what the “blue monkeys” really want. The very same Parker Selfridge, however, has no doubts about what is the most important thing in the whole operation and he explicitly says: “Killing the indigenous looks bad, but there's one thing that shareholders hate more than bad press, and that's bad quarterly statement.”

11

Unlike indigenous and ecofeminist spirituality concepts, Greek mythology and deep ecology ideas, the synthesis of the theories of life developed by Fritjof Capra is less known. Namely, by comparing peak achievements of a series of Western sciences, Capra very convincingly elaborated the understanding of life as the web of webs (Capra, 1997; Capra, 2004); on presumptions and consequences of this concept, see also Zeman, 2003; Zeman, 2007. One can find the echo of this perception in the words said by the main hero, Jake



For instance, *Pandora* (Greek: Πανδώρα) is a significant figure from the Greek mythology – a woman who opened a box out of curiosity thus paving the way for all the evil of the world to come out. As for *Eywa*, she is like Mother Earth or the Goddess, the guiding force and deity of Pandora who acts to keep the ecosystem of Pandora in perfect equilibrium, which is, evidently, inspired by the well-known Lovelock's concept about the planet Earth as Gaia – a living self-controlling organism. Besides, one can also find the motifs of the Ancestor Tree, the initiation rituals that resemble those practised in many ancient civilizations etc. As we know, the methodology of the *New Age* approach is neither rigorous nor puristic; it, actually, allows compilation of segments from different sources according to a compiler affinities and following the minimum compatibility requirements – anything goes.

The way of life, relationship with the nature and the culture of the Na'vi are similar to a number of native communities cultures, their elementary characteristic being the deep connection with the planet and all the living beings on it and with the "universal spirit". What we have here is a social form that resembles neolithic communities, based on the structure of clans, characterized by extremely complex culture and the uninterrupted chain of intergenerational transmission of knowledge. Furthermore, the elements of clothing, hairstyles, dances, initiation rituals, traditional know-hows and practices of the Na'vi is a kind of mixture of the folk elements of African and North-American (Indian) tribes of long ago.

In Hindu tradition the idea of avatar most frequently denotes the embodiment of the Hindu divinity Vishnu or "descent of God into a human or animal shape" in order to confront the evil on the Earth (*Religijski leksikon*, 1999: 30). The appearance of avatar is connected with the periods of decadence, crises and great perils – avatar is "a messianic figure" (Hinnells, 1995: 59). By using this name to denote the beings that were created by combining DNKs of earthlings and beings from outer space, broadens the usual semantic field of this perception – in Hindu tradition it is the idea of the incarnation of God that we have, who descended all the way "down", while in the Cameron's film it is genetically mutants that we have, that are, *in ultima linea*, controlled by the earthlings. As the result, this brings about certain confusion, but, on the other hand, some inspirational ambivalences are introduced at the same time.

New World colonization, noble savage and white hero

The basic patterns one can find in this film pertaining to the colonization of an intergalactic New World stand on the old and "well-proved" matrix of the colonization of the so-called New World on Earth, its nature and culture. In Hollywood cinematography there is tendency of dualistic presentation of some native community, ingenuous population of this "New World". In classical westerns, these people are, in most cases, shown as plunderers and blood-thirsty savages (Benshoff & Griffin, 2009); however, Cameron shows sympathies towards quite an opposite stereotype figure – an Indian as a benign, noble, wild and infantile version of a man. The stylization thereof is pervaded by a number of simplified and distorted perceptions of Indian cultures, which are, evidently, characteristic of many *New Age* compilations.

The idealizing-romantic presentation of the Na'vi as "good savages" defines them, strictly speaking, in animalistic way. As a matter of fact, they are shown as beings very similar to animals and very close to the nature (indeed, almost

fused into it), their “primitivism” and “animalism” being supported by their way of expressing, body language and communication customs. The Na’vi, for instance, express their anger by growling like wild animals. Such and similar presentations fit well into the stereotype perceptions of *Other* as a wild and unrestrained, something out of control, uncivilized and non-Western... This is, actually, the interpretation pattern practised by the white Europeans at their invasions of the, so called, New World, from 15th century onwards. The white man is here again shown as the chosen one, the torchbearer of civilization, while the “savages” – as indigenous “animals” – are interpreted not only as ‘the good ones’, but also as ‘the noble ones’, in every respect as the ‘untouched’ and ‘pure’, ‘virgin’ nature they reside. Thus the Na’vi definitely remind of the colonized nations on the Earth in both Americas and in Africa. However, not any aspect of idealization perception of the natives can set aside the fact that they are inferior, which emerges from the fundamental asymmetry between the colonizers and the colonized.

Conclusion: capitalism returns home

When it comes to talking about ideological-worldview background, it is possible, indeed, to detect white patriarchal capitalism ideology in *Avatar* in all its pivotal dimensions: racial, gender,¹² class-materialistic. Next to it, one could also find the elements of anthropocentrism and speciesism, in that, in the context of *Avatar*’s narrative, anthropocentrism inevitably transfers into a specific form of speciesism (which could not be brought down to racism, but it contains racism in itself as a component). It is not, actually, the question of predominance of a man over an animal or over a man of different colour, but of supremacy of earthlings over humanoid and intelligent unearthly beings. It comes out that the axis of asymmetry goes deeper than the race and hits the very species – actually, species from outer space.

Nevertheless, it is not the apology of white patriarchal capitalism that is the point at issue. The structure of the entire story, its implicit and explicit “messages”, and particularly its dramatic climax, imply a definite critical withdrawal from the major premises of the white patriarchal capitalism and from the motivation of greedy and aggressive earthlings. The consequence of all this, in the end, is the pessimistic conclusion about the future of mankind. Because in the mythical battle between the colonizers army that cares only about plundering the vital natural resources and the local people who defend not only the beauty of their picturesque world, but also their bare survival, it is the colonizers who are heavily defeated. After the local people win, Pandora

Sully: “I’m trying to understand this deep connection the people have to the forest. She talks about a network of energy that flows through all living things. She says, all energy is only borrowed and one day you have to give it back.” On the other hand, by making comments on connection of everything with anything on Pandora, the scientist Grace Augustine resolutely claims: “I’m not talking about some kind of pagan voodoo here. I’m talking about something real, something measurable in the biology of the forest.”

would restrict ourselves to just a few observations. Female characters – in spite of their indisputable potency – do not possess sufficient, victorious power, after all (except for Mo’at, the priestess, who reflects the ecofeminist idea on women as beings closer to the nature). The earthlings – Dr. Grace and the brave pilot Trudy Chacon – on the contrary, die (although their deaths are not made senseless). The fact that out of 15 significant roles in the film only four have been reserved for women, should not be neglected either (see cast overview on: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0499549/>).

¹²

Gender component in *Avatar* narrative deserves a separate analysis, so that here we

is saved, while the corporation and the army return to the Earth empty-handed. One of the colonizers, paraplegic marine Jake Sully – who transformed into “the chosen one” along the way – Toruk Makto, the saviour of the Na’vi people – shortly sums up the whole situation in the following words: “The aliens went back to their dying world. Only a few were chosen to stay. The time of Great Sorrow was ending. Toruk Makto was no longer needed”. In our context the most important is the first sentence, the one stating that “the aliens went back to their dying world”. Earthlings, as a matter of fact, became aliens, which confirms that Jake Sully not only changed the side, but also underwent a radical transformation in which the old was supposed to die for the new to be born. And then, the most important point – aliens went back to their *dying* world. That is to say, planet Earth is the world without a future. The fatality of this situation can be analyzed in three premises: first, earthlings are incorrigible white (patriarchal) capitalists; second, greed, violence and madness that are inevitably the consequence of the destructiveness of (the white patriarchal) capitalism take to unavoidable disaster; third, earthlings are not able to think and act in any other way whatsoever – this is in their nature, so that even the mythical clash in the battle with the Na’vi people didn’t teach them the lesson.¹³

After all, the conclusion unavoidably arises that earthlings are definitely not capable of a long-term survival. And therefore, their coming back to Earth is nothing else but their return to the dying world.

By answering the questions which we put above, we can come to the conclusion that *Avatar*, consequently, is not an optimistic film. Its central topic, that on the environmental issues, is outlined in a somewhat simplified way, which is in many aspects moderated by the fact that it’s a typical Hollywood product, namely, the most successful blockbuster in the history of the film industry. Environmental issues make only one thematic axis of this film which functions as a multi-layered, internally contradictory text open to different interpretations. These diverse interpretation possibilities are basically defined by the viewpoints and worldview-value backgrounds of a recipient and also by the general cultural context in which the reception is taking place. Therefore its ultimate capability to instruct on environmental issues should not be *a priori* either underestimated or overestimated. On the other hand, we believe there is nothing wrong in the fact that such serious and acute topics may be dealt with also by some top-quality artefacts coming from the cultural industry, since any and every form of evoking sensibility of the public for such topics is most certainly welcome. However, one should not forget, at the same time, that the impact that every film may have is essentially limited both by the cognitive and receptive “attunement” of the spectators, and also by the fact that celluloid utopias lose quite much of their persuasiveness when their magic is dispersed by the daily light.

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We could not, in any way, speak of the apology of capitalism in *Avatar*; but rather of some kind of fatalistic reconciliation with its inescapable malevolent nature. In other words, it seems that capitalism is not possible to be either improved or abandoned. One can find a very similar "judgement" passed on the human race in another SF film, and that is the already mentioned *The Matrix* (1999) in which Agent Smith confides his "revelation" on the human species to the arrested Morpheus by saying: "It came to me when I tried to classify your species and I realized that you're not actually mammals. Every mammal on this planet instinctively develops a natural equilibrium with the surrounding environ-

ment but you humans do not. You move to an area and you multiply and multiply until every natural resource is consumed and the only way you can survive is to spread to another area. There is another organism on this planet that follows the same pattern. Do you know what it is? A virus. Human beings are a disease, a cancer of this planet" (<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0133093/quotes>). Agent Smith, consequently, does not speak of capitalism, but he anchors the cause of the human species destruction even deeper, in its very nature. However, we could not in this paper discuss the implications of these theses (which seem to establish too close a relationship between human nature and capitalism).

Zdenko Zeman, Marija Geiger Zeman

**Ekološka pitanja iz holivudske perspektive –
celuloidne utopije i antropocentrični bijeli patrijarhalni kapitalizam**

Sažetak

Filmovi su ujedno snažne umjetničke forme kao i višeslojni tekstovi, koji publici prenose određene semantičko-aksiološke sadržaje. Ovi sadržaji artikuliraju različite vrijednosti te ideološke i svjetonazorne »poruke«. Mnoge teorijske i kritičke analize pokazale su da su znanstveno-fantastični filmovi vrsta nositelja vizije o percepciji i vrednovanju prirode od strane budućeg društva. Ova razmatranja – opisivanje aktualnih ekoloških problema i dilema – nisu osobitost samo ZF filmova; postoji velik broj filmova u rasponu od ekocentričnih do anti-ekoloških svjetonazora. Ovaj rad ispituje veze između bioetičkih problema i filmske industrije analizirajući ključne teme u holivudskom blockbustera Jamesa Camerona Avatar, s posebnim naglaskom na njihove prezentacije i interpretacije prirode, tehnologije, rase i roda.

Ključne riječi

filmovi, Avatar, ekološki svjetonazori, antropocentrizam, priroda, tehnologija, rasa, Drugi, rod, kapitalizam

Zdenko Zeman, Marija Geiger Zeman

**Die Umweltfragen von dem Standpunkt des Hollywood –
zelluloide Utopien und der anthropozentrische patriarchalische
Kapitalismus der Weißen**

Zusammenfassung

Die Filme amtieren sowohl als künstlerische Formen wie auch als vielschichtige Texte, die gewisse semantisch-axiologische Inhalte dem Publikum übermitteln. Dieser Stoff verleiht unterschiedlichen Werten sowie ideologischen und weltanschaulichen „Nachrichten“ Ausdruck. Mancherlei theoretische und kritische Analysen legten an den Tag, die abenteuerlich-fantastischen Filme repräsentierten eine Art Visionsträger im Hinblick auf die Perzeption bzw. Bewertung der Natur vonseiten der zukünftigen Gesellschaft. Die erwähnte Hauptsorge – Schilderung der brennenden ökologischen Probleme und Zwangslagen – ist eine Eigentümlichkeit nicht nur der SF-Filme; es besteht eine erkleckliche Anzahl jener, die sich von der ökozentrischen bis hin zur antiökologischen Weltsicht spannen. Der Artikel stellt Überlegungen an über die Verknüpfungen zwischen bioethischer Problematik und Filmindustrie, indem er die Schlüsselthematik in James Camerons Hollywood-Blockbuster Avatar – Aufbruch nach Pandora studiert, mit speziellem Nachdruck auf deren Präsentationen und Interpretationen von Natur, Technologie, Rasse und Gender.

Schlüsselwörter

Filme, Avatar – Aufbruch nach Pandora, ökologische Weltanschauungen, Anthropozentrismus, Natur, Technologie, Rasse, der Andere, Gender, Kapitalismus

Zdenko Zeman, Marija Geiger Zeman

**Questions écologiques à partir d'une perspectives hollywoodienne –
utopies en celluloïd et capitalisme patriarcal blanc**

Résumé

Les films sont à la fois des formes artistiques fortes et des textes à multiples couches qui transmettent à l'audience certains contenus sémantico-axiologiques. Ces contenus articulent différentes valeurs ainsi que des „messages“ idéologiques et de conception du monde. Nombre d'analyses théoriques et critiques ont montré que les films de science-fiction sont une sorte de porteurs de la vision de la perception et de l'appréciation de la nature par la société future. Ces préoccupations – la description des problèmes et dilemmes écologiques actuels – ne sont pas une

particularité des films de SF ; il existe un certain nombre de films qui s'étendent des conceptions du monde écocentriques jusqu'aux conceptions du monde anti-écologiques. Cet article examine les liens entre les problèmes éthiques et l'industrie cinématographique en analysant les thèmes clé dans le blockbuster hollywoodien Avatar de James Cameron, avec un accent particulier sur leur présentation et leur interprétation de la nature, de la technologie et du genre.

Mots-clés

films, *Avatar*, conceptions du monde écologiques, anthropocentrisme, nature, technologie, race, Autre, genre, capitalisme